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ABSTRACT

This brief examines changes in the number of naturalized citizens in the United States and the rate of naturalization, also exploring the size and characteristics of the pool of immigrants now or soon to be eligible to naturalize. Analysis of data from the Current Population Survey indicates that beginning in the mid-1990s, the number of naturalized citizens rose for the first time in decades, from 6.5 million to 11 million citizens by 2002. The share of legal immigrants who had naturalized rose to 49 percent in 2002 after a steep downward trend from 64 percent in 1970 to 39 percent in 1996. Despite rising numbers and rates, a large pool of immigrants, almost 8 million, is now eligible to naturalize. Of these, 2.7 million live in Canada, and another 2.7 legal immigrants are likely to soon become eligible to naturalize. Eligible immigrants who have not yet naturalized differ significantly from recently naturalized citizens. For example, those not yet naturalized have more limited English language skills, have less education, and are more heavily Mexican. A table shows the number of eligible and naturalized immigrants in each state, and lists the major destination and new growth states.(SM)

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Immigrant Families and Workers

FACTS AND PERSPECTIVES BRIEF NO. 3

TRENDS IN NATURALIZATION

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OVERVIEW

In this brief, we examine changes in the number of naturalized citizens and the rate of naturalization. We also explore the size and characteristics of the pool of immigrants in the United States now or soon to be eligible to naturalize. Core findings include:

- Beginning in the mid-1990s, the number of naturalized citizens rose for the first time in decades, from 6.5 to 11 million citizens by 2002.
- The share of legal immigrants who had naturalized rose to 49 percent in 2002 after a steep downward trend—from 64 percent in 1970 to 39 percent in 1996.
- Despite rising numbers and rates, a large pool of immigrants—almost 8 million—is now eligible to naturalize. 2.7 million live in California.
- Another 2.7 million legal immigrants are likely to soon become eligible to naturalize.
- The eligible immigrants who have not yet naturalized differ significantly from recently naturalized citizens. For example, those not yet naturalized
  - have more limited English language skills;
  - have less education; and
  - are more heavily Mexican.

Any moves to expand or target naturalization programs including language and civics instruction should take these characteristics into account.

INTRODUCTION

The Policy Imperative. Naturalization is the gateway to citizenship for immigrants and to full membership and political participation in U.S. society. The importance of naturalization—and citizenship—has risen since the mid-1990s, when welfare and illegal immigration reform based access to public benefits and selected rights increasingly on citizenship.[1]

Even so, few public policies promote naturalization. No notice is sent to refugees and immigrants when they become eligible to naturalize.[2] Comparatively little public funding underwrites language and civics classes to help legal immigrants pass the citizenship exam. (Indeed, changes in the test now being piloted may make it more difficult.) While the number of immigrants naturalizing increased rapidly during the 1990s, backlogs for immigration benefits are now lengthening and it remains to be seen whether President Bush's pledge to reduce naturalization backlogs to 6 months will be fulfilled by the 2004 target date.

[1] These include the right not to be deported for minor crimes or misdemeanors—referred to as the right to residential security. See generally, The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, PL. 104-193 (1996); The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, PL. 104-208 (1996).

[2] Tamar Jacoby, "Glad You Could Join Us," *The New York Post* Online Edition, July 4, 2003.

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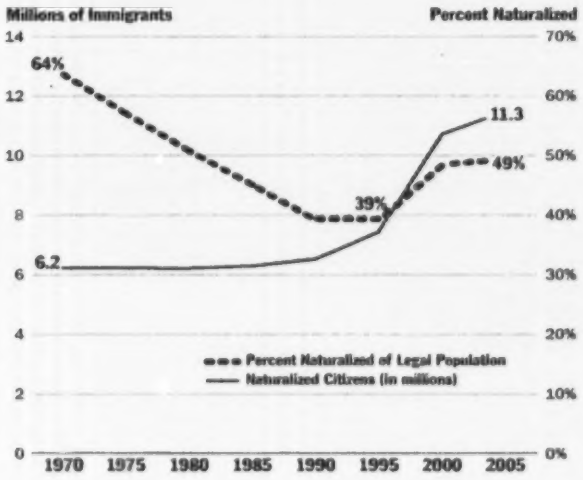
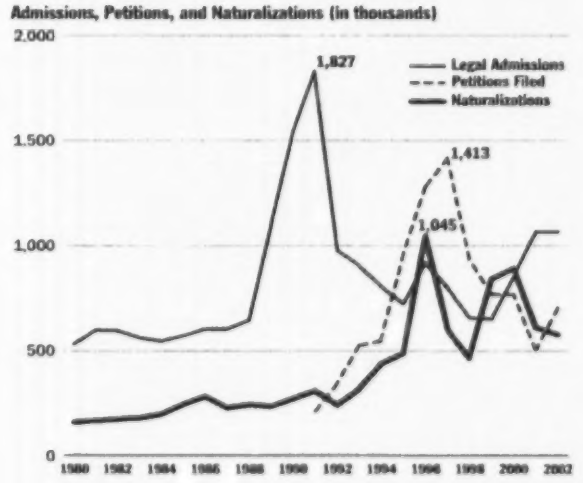
FIGURE 1. Citizenship Status of the Legal Foreign-Born Population: 1970–2002



Source: Urban Institute estimates based on Census and CPS data.

FIGURE 2. Naturalizations, Naturalization Petitions Filed, and Legal Admissions: 1980–2002



Source: Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2002.*

Do these trends suggest the need for a more engaged and inclusive naturalization campaign, both public and private? It is hard to answer this question without answering other questions first:

- What percentage of immigrants who are eligible to naturalize become citizens? How has that share changed in recent decades?
- Is there a large immigrant population that could naturalize but hasn't? If so, how is it distributed across the states?
- Do these "eligibles" differ significantly from those who have recently chosen to naturalize? What do the differences suggest about barriers to naturalization and the policies that might reduce them?

WHAT SHARE OF LEGAL IMMIGRANTS NATURALIZES?

High Levels of Immigration. During the 1980s and 1990s, roughly 24 million immigrants entered the United States. Flows in each decade exceeded those of any prior decade in U.S. history. We estimate that by 2002 the foreign-born population had reached 34 million, more than tripling in 30 years. Some 11.3 million of the total were naturalized citizens (representing 32 percent of the foreign-born population); 12.2 million were "legal permanent residents" or legal aliens (35 percent); and over 9 million were undocumented immigrants (27 percent).

Rise in the Naturalized Population. These recent immigrant numbers reflect a decade of very dynamic population change. On the one hand, the number of undocumented residents is rising faster than ever before—from about 3.5 million in 1990 to more than 9 million in 2002.

On the other hand, for the first time in over 25 years, we see a rise in the number of naturalized immigrants—from 6.5 million in 1990 to 7.5 million in the mid-1990s to over 11 million in 2002 (Figure 1). Annual naturalizations surged, peaking at over 1 million in 1996, and even now remain well above levels of the 1980s (Figure 2).[3]

Rates Rise As Well. Since the early 1990s, naturalization rates among eligible populations have also risen. As Figure 1

[3] Note also that current levels would be even higher but for the large backlogs in naturalization applications. Backlogs began to rise significantly in the early 1990s as the number of petitions filed for naturalization exceeded the number of naturalizations (Figure 2). With the slowdown of processing of naturalizations in 1997, backlogs exploded and only began to decrease in 1999–2001 as the number naturalized exceeded the number of new petitions.

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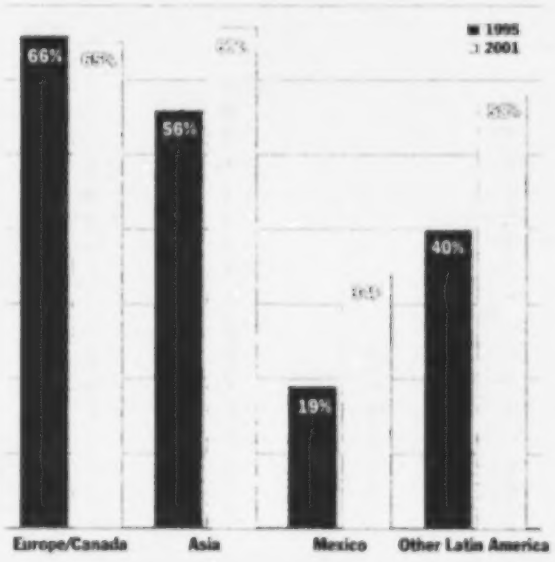
indicates, the share of legal immigrants who had naturalized fell steadily from 64 percent in 1970 to 39 percent in 1996. The drop during the 1970s and 1980s stems from rising legal immigration, steady numbers of naturalizations, and deaths among an aging naturalized population. But the large surge in naturalizations brought the rate up sharply in the late 1990s. By 2000, about half of all legal immigrants, and almost 60 percent of eligible immigrants, had naturalized.

Some explain the surge as a response to legislation restricting public benefits for noncitizens, enacted first in California (Proposition 187) and later by the U.S. Congress (i.e., the 1996 welfare and illegal immigration reform laws). By naturalizing, immigrants can now both retain access to social programs and respond at the polls to anti-immigrant sentiments. Another driving factor is a large increase in the number of immigrants eligible to naturalize. Not only have immigration levels increased; nearly all of the 2.7 million undocumented who legalized under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act in the late 1980s became eligible for citizenship by 1994. Meanwhile, the costs of replacing an expiring green card rose, narrowing differences between the price of renewing the card and naturalizing. And, finally, many important sending countries (such as Mexico) eased restrictions on dual nationality during the 1990s.

Naturalization Rates Vary across Sending Regions. We see wide variation across sending regions and countries in naturalization rates and in their rate of change during the 1990s. In 1995, only 19 percent of Mexican immigrants eligible to naturalize had done so, compared with 66 percent of immigrants from Europe and Canada (Figure 3).[4] By 2001, the share of eligible Mexicans naturalizing rose to 34 percent while the share of Europeans and Canadians held steady. Large hikes in naturalization rates also occurred among immigrants from other Latin American countries (40 to 58 percent). By 2001, Asians and Europeans were the most likely to be naturalized.[5]

FIGURE 3. Percent Naturalized among Legal Immigrants Eligible to Naturalize, by Region of Birth: 1995 and 2001



Source: Urban Institute estimates based on March 1995 and 2001 Current Population Surveys. See Methodological Note (pg. 5) for definitions.

[4] The metrics in Figures 1 and 3 are slightly different. In Figure 1, the percentage is computed as naturalized citizens divided by all legal immigrants, whether eligible to naturalize or not. Figure 3 uses a true "rate" based on naturalized citizens and only those aliens *eligible to naturalize*, defined as legal immigrants who have been in the U.S. for at least 5 years and those in the country for at least 3 years who are married to a U.S. citizen.

[5] These large continental groupings mask considerable differences in the propensity to naturalize and in rates of increase across individual countries.

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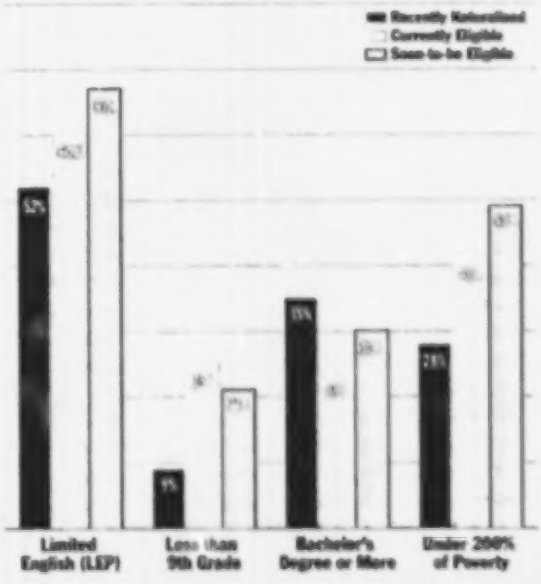
About 20 percent of legal immigrants currently eligible to naturalize—at least 3.5 million adults—are estimated to be "limited English proficient."

FIGURE 4. Selected Characteristics of Immigrant Citizenship Groups: 2000–2001



Source: Urban Institute estimates for population age 25 and over (18 and over for poverty population) from March 2000 and 2001 CPS. See Methodological Note (pg. 5) for definitions.

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IS THERE A LARGE POOL OF ELIGIBLES? HOW DO THEY DIFFER FROM THE RECENTLY NATURALIZED?

Large Pool of Eligible Immigrants Remains. Despite rising naturalization rates, the pool of legal immigrants eligible to naturalize remains strikingly large. Of the 11.3 million legal aliens in the 2002 Current Population Survey (CPS), some 7.9 million are currently eligible to naturalize.[6] Most of the rest (2.7 million) are adults over 18 who have not been in the U.S. long enough to become citizens; the balance is made up of children under 18. Even with high naturalization rates, the numbers of eligible immigrants will continue to grow if high current rates of immigration continue.

Comparison to Recently Naturalized. Comparing characteristics of immigrants who are eligible to naturalize with those who have recently naturalized reveals some of the factors affecting the likelihood that eligible immigrants will become citizens and the institutional challenges raised. Available data do not readily permit such analyses, but we can approximate what we need with CPS data. (See Methodological Note, pg. 5.)

What, then, are some key characteristics of the eligible and recently naturalized populations?

Limited English Skills. The eligible population has limited English skills:

- About 60 percent of legal immigrants currently eligible to naturalize—at least 3.5 million adults—are estimated to be "limited English proficient"[7] or LEP (Figure 4).[8]
- About 40 percent of the currently eligible population have even more limited English language skills, reporting that they speak English "not well" or "not at all."
- An even higher percentage of the soon-to-be-eligible population is LEP—67 percent or at least 1.5 million adult immigrants (Figure 4).

[6] Census-based estimates of the legal alien population cited on pg. 2 are adjusted for immigrants not counted in the 2000 Census and March 2002 CPS. All other analyses of the total legal alien population in this brief do not make this adjustment.

[7] According to the Census definitions, English proficient respondents either speak English at home or report speaking it "very well." Limited English proficient (LEP) respondents report speaking English "well," "not well," or "not at all." The CPS does not collect information on English proficiency, so the figures in this section are estimates developed by combining information on English proficiency, country of birth, citizenship, and education from the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (C2SS) with CPS data on the same populations.

[8] All absolute population numbers cited in this section should be considered minimums because of the restricted definitions of "recently naturalized" and "eligible to naturalize" and because the CPS omits some immigrants.

All told, then, at least 5 million immigrants with limited English skills are now, or will soon be, eligible to naturalize. Many in this group could benefit from expanded language and civics instruction programs.

Despite rising naturalization rates, the pool of legal immigrants eligible to naturalize remains strikingly large.

LEPs are less heavily represented among the "recently naturalized" population. Still, slightly over half of the recently naturalized, or about 600,000 naturalized citizens, have limited proficiency in English. This high percentage indicates that perfect English is not required to naturalize and that language training beyond the noncitizen population is needed.

Lower Education Levels. Like that of the immigrant population generally, the education profile of the eligible population resembles an hourglass. Large shares of immigrants are clustered at the top and the bottom. One-quarter of the eligibles fall in the bottom of the hourglass as about 1.4 million adult immigrants eligible to naturalize have less than a ninth grade education, compared with only 9 percent of the recently naturalized population (Figure 4). Thus,

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

In our analyses, we distinguish among three populations: (1) the recently naturalized and all naturalized citizens; (2) legal immigrants now in the United States who are eligible to naturalize; and (3) legal immigrants now in the U.S. who soon will be eligible. We draw on previous Urban Institute work to assign legal status to respondents to the Current Population Survey (CPS).[1]

The CPS does not differentiate among legal immigrants, undocumented immigrants, and temporary residents. Moreover, CPS data tend to overstate the number of naturalized citizens, especially among recent arrivals. We use methods developed in prior Urban Institute research to correct for misreporting of citizenship and assign legal status to foreign-born CPS respondents. Since we can exclude undocumented immigrants and legal temporary residents, our comparisons of naturalized citizens and legal aliens are more precise.

Becoming a naturalized citizen generally requires a waiting period after an immigrant becomes a legal permanent resident (i.e., holds a "green card"). For most analyses, then, we define immigrants *eligible to naturalize* as legal immigrants age 18 or over who have been in the U.S. at least five years *or* who have been here for three years and are married to a U.S. citizen.

The CPS does not ask about date of naturalization, so to determine recent patterns, we define the *recently naturalized* as naturalized citizens who have been in the United States for less than 14 years. A significant number of people in the total naturalized population have been in the country for a long time and naturalized many years ago. Their age, national origin, and other characteristics differ greatly from those of entrants in recent decades. More important, all naturalized citizens differ significantly from the recently naturalized, so we restrict the citizens chosen for analysis.

Long-term immigrants who chose not to naturalize differ in similar ways from recent legal arrivals. Thus, for comparison with the recently naturalized, we restrict the eligible group to green card holders who have entered the United States since 1975. Further, we define legal immigrants who are *soon-to-be eligible to naturalize* as green card holders age 18 and over who have not been in the U.S. long enough to naturalize.

[1] See, for example, Jeffrey S. Passel and Rebecca L. Clark, *Immigrants in New York: Their Legal Status, Incomes and Tax Payments*, Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, April 1998, or Michael Fix and Jeffrey S. Passel, "Assessing Welfare Reform's Immigrant Provisions," in Alan Weil and Ken Finegold (eds.), *Welfare Reform: The Next Act*, Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 2002.

instructional systems will have to grapple not just with language, but also with literacy issues. At the top of the hourglass, 23 percent of eligibles hold a bachelor's degree or more. In contrast, 35 percent of the recently naturalized have at least a bachelor's degree.

Low Incomes. A correlate of limited English skill and education is low income:

- 41 percent—or 2.4 million—of the immigrants currently eligible to naturalize have incomes under 200 percent of the poverty level (Figure 4).
- 17 percent—or a little less than 1 million—of the eligibles have incomes under the federal poverty level (not shown separately).
- Twenty-eight percent of the recently naturalized have incomes below 200 percent of the poverty level; only 11 percent are under the federal poverty level.

Labor Force Participation. Labor force participation is higher for the recently naturalized, especially among women. Almost all recently naturalized and currently eligible males work. Rates of labor force participation for the soon-to-be eligible are lower partly because they are relatively young and more are still enrolled in school.

Immigrant women generally have lower labor force participation rates than immigrant men and native women. Recently naturalized women, however, are substantially more likely to participate in the labor force than legal immigrant women who have not naturalized.

National Origins. The national origins of the currently eligible pool differ from those of the recently naturalized. Mexico is perhaps the most striking case. There were 2.3 million Mexicans eligible to naturalize as of 2001—10 times the number from any other sending country.[9] While Mexicans are 28 percent of all currently eligible immigrants, they represent only 9 percent of recently naturalized citizens. In a sharp contrast, Asians represent 27 percent of the eligible pool but 43 percent of recently naturalized citizens. Expressed differently, only 21 percent of eligible Mexicans entering in the past 20 years have naturalized while 57 percent of Asians have done so.

Refugees More Likely to Naturalize. Refugees are disproportionately represented among the recently naturalized. While refugees are only 7 percent of all immigrants and 14 percent of the currently eligible population, they represent 24 percent of the recently naturalized. If allowance is made for income, education, and other individual characteristics, refugees are 1.5 times more likely than other eligible legal immigrants to naturalize.

These naturalization rates are higher partly because few refugees in the United States can return to their home countries. In addition, refugees are often treated more generously than legal immigrants by public and private agencies. Many are taught some English, introduced to U.S. institutions and civic life, and given help entering the labor force when they first arrive.

Welfare Users Not a Large Share of Naturalized or Eligibles. Some argue that immigrants naturalize to retain (or acquire) welfare benefits. Neither our results nor other recent research support this notion. In fact, consistent with their higher incomes and employment rates, recently naturalized immigrants appear to use public benefits (except for Supplemental Security Income) at slightly lower rates than do the pool of currently eligible immigrants. Moreover, use rates for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) plummeted in recent years for immigrants in both the naturalized and currently eligible groups. Only about 1 percent of the recently naturalized were receiving TANF payments in 2000–01; of the currently eligible pool, 2.6 percent were doing so. In contrast, in 1995–96, 2.5 percent of the recently naturalized and 6.7 percent of the eligible population were receiving TANF.

Geographic Distribution of the Eligible Population. As Table 1 indicates, the eligible population is highly concentrated in the six major destination states (California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois).[10] About three-quarters of the 7.9 million eligible to naturalize as of 2002 live in these six states; one-third (or 2.7 million) live in California alone. About 1 million, or 12 percent, of the eligibles live in the 22 "new growth" states that saw their immigrant populations soar during the 1990s and 13 percent live in the remaining 23 states, where growth was relatively slower. Among the major destination states, Texas alone has an eligible population larger than its naturalized population. Only four states have more immigrants eligible to naturalize than already naturalized.

[9] This number covers all periods of entry, not just post-1975 entrants.

[10] The populations discussed in this paragraph include all immigrants over 18 who have been in the country long enough to be eligible to naturalize, not just the post-1975 arrivals included in the "currently eligible." Likewise, the naturalized population here includes all naturalized immigrants over 18, not just the "recently naturalized."

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TABLE 1. Naturalized and Eligible Population, by State: March 2002 CPS

State	Eligible to Naturalize (000s)	Naturalized (000s)	Percent Naturalized of Eligible	Soon-to-be Eligible (000s)
Total	**7,911**	**11,146**	**58%**	**2,661**
Major Destinations	**5,914**	**7,663**	**56%**	**1,758**
California	2,695	3,018	53%	717
New York	1,133	1,673	60%	282
Texas	766	727	49%	263
Florida	607	1,181	66%	219
New Jersey	373	592	61%	134
Illinois	340	473	58%	142
New Growth States	**981**	**1,474**	**60%**	**419**
Arizona	183	223	55%	36
Washington	114	207	65%	82
North Carolina	69	71	50%	36
Georgia	69	139	67%	31
Nevada	69	123	64%	18
Oregon	63	79	56%	35
Colorado	61	87	59%	51
Minnesota	47	88	65%	7
Utah	39	40	51%	12
Oklahoma	31	33	52%	8
Arkansas	30	20	40%	3
Tennessee	28	58	67%	17
Iowa	28	32	53%	19
South Carolina	27	48	64%	8
Idaho	25	17	41%	5
Kansas	24	46	65%	15
Indiana	19	59	76%	5
Nebraska	18	25	58%	5
Kentucky	13	24	65%	13
Alabama	12	25	67%	7
Mississippi	6	10	60%	5
Delaware	4	18	80%	2
All Other States	**1,016**	**2,009**	**66%**	**484**
Massachusetts	179	278	61%	89
Pennsylvania	115	225	66%	65
Michigan	115	269	70%	53
Maryland	98	220	69%	51
Virginia	84	203	71%	65
Ohio	83	140	63%	44
Connecticut	63	173	73%	18
Wisconsin	45	77	63%	20
New Mexico	40	39	49%	10
Hawaii	39	99	72%	14
Rhode Island	35	48	57%	9
Missouri	26	63	71%	8
Louisiana	23	48	68%	18
New Hampshire	17	30	64%	2
District of Columbia	14	21	60%	5
Maine	14	17	55%	2
Alaska	9	25	73%	4
Vermont	5	10	68%	1
West Virginia	3	9	73%	<1
Montana	3	5	68%	1
South Dakota	2	5	69%	2
North Dakota	2	2	48%	3
Wyoming	1	5	79%	1

Source: Urban Institute tabulations. Eligibles include all immigrants over 18 who have been in the country long enough to be eligible to naturalize, not just the post-1975 arrivals included in the "currently eligible." Naturalized population includes all naturalized immigrants over 18, not just the "recently naturalized."

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CONCLUSION

The last decade has seen the immigrant population change along with the benefits and rights that flow from citizenship. Naturalization rates climbed as the percentage of immigrants who had become citizens increased from 39 to 49 percent. An increase of this magnitude is remarkable in the face of continuing high levels of legal immigration. At the same time, though, a large pool of more than 7.5 million legal immigrants is currently eligible to naturalize. Many of its members come from groups that have been underrepresented among the recently naturalized or face such barriers to naturalization as limited English skills, little formal education, and low incomes.

If the policy goal is to promote integration of immigrants by encouraging naturalization, the characteristics of the eligible pool suggest the value of expanding publicly supported language and civics instruction and approaching changes to the citizenship examination cautiously. One reform option worth further study would be to offer intensive language and civics courses as an alternative to taking the citizenship test. Finally, the comparatively high levels of naturalization found among refugees suggest the need to reexamine the refugee resettlement program with an eye to understanding the practices that promote citizenship.

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